
INTRODUCTION

THE VALLEY OF MIREBALAIS

THE TRAVELER comes suddenly on the valley of Mirebalais, as the road from the capital turns the shoulder of a hill. Long and narrow, the plain stretches before him with its many tones of green. Ahead is the village from which the valley takes its name, its metal roofs aglow in the sunlight, or reflecting the gray sky of the rainy season. Here and there appears a yellow, muddy slash made by the Artibonite River, while framing the valley are the mountains, rising one behind another as they complete its encirclement.

This first glimpse of the country gives no hint of a numerous population. It is as though this valley, like so many other things in Haiti, had set out to belie its own reality and, in this impression, at the very outset to point the lesson that the observer must seek well beneath the surface if he is to attain any understanding of the country and its people. For just as the unsettled appearance of this Haitian valley conceals numerous habitations, cultivated fields, and hard-working inhabitants, so the frenzy of Haitian religious rites is but a gloss upon disciplined ceremonialism, and the relatively placid everyday existence of the Haitian peasant but a mask behind which is waged a spiritual conflict that is his heritage from the dual sources of his traditions.

The commune of Mirebalais is situated in the heart of central Haiti. Lying some thirty-five miles from Port-au-Prince,

101 both town and district are bisected by the main route be-
36 tween the capitals of the Haitian and the Dominican republics. Yet, once again, this geographical nearness but distorts
[491] the psychological distance between Mirebalais and the metropolis. For though the busses, converted from camions, pass to and from the coastal city several times a week, the valley and even the town which is its center drowse in essential isolation. A few hundred yards off the main road find the Haitian peasant following the mode of life of his forebears, oblivious of events outside the valley. Only for a few of the *notables* of the town, the *gros nègres*, who have personal, political, or business contacts with Port-au-Prince, is the comparative proximity to the capital meaningful.

174 It is not possible to say how long this valley has been inhabited. Certainly the early Indians roamed there; and there, as in other parts of the island of Hispaniola, the tragedy of their extinction under the brutality of early Spanish rule must have taken place. Moreau de St. Mery, to whom all students of
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103 Haiti must acknowledge a debt of gratitude for his painstakingly accurate reports of life on the island, gives the derivation of its name.

"Mirebalais received its name," he says, "because of the enormous numbers of wild animals the first Frenchmen found there, which recalled to them the small district in the region of Poitou [in France], called Mirebalais, where some of them had probably first seen the light of day. These quadrupeds, first introduced by the Spaniards, had no difficulty in multiplying there after the Indians had disappeared from their native land and the Spaniards, reduced in numbers, were obliged to abandon the great plains, so that horses, cattle, etc. came to exercise exclusive domain."¹

175 St. Mery's work, which traces the development of Mirebalais as one of the parishes of pre-Revolutionary Haiti, makes it

FRENCH COLONIAL ORIGINS

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175 equaled the demand for them; in 1791 the census listed half a million
 24 then living, but no writer seems to have even a vague idea of how
 567 many millions were imported during the sixty years of the colony's
 heyday.

175 Production, particularly of sugar and coffee, steadily increased
 until the tiny colony ranked among the wealthiest regions of the
 245 world. The Spanish Indies were declining, so that Saint-Domingue
 249 alone far outranked them all combined between 1766 and 1791.
 433 Splendid roads were built, extensive irrigation projects developed,
 511 and stately mansions erected. Life moved along with ceremony and
 565 display—for the planters; attended by their black lackeys, the white
 French masters entertained royally or were driven like lords in their
 coaches to make formal visits to neighbors. Many of these well-to-do
 colonials spent half their time in Paris, ostentatiously spending their
 riches. To be "wealthy as a Creole" came to be a common expression
 in France.¹ Perhaps nowhere in the Americas was existence at once so
 delightful and so ornamental as it was for the wealthy planters among
 the 36,000 whites of Saint-Domingue in 1791.

175 For the mother country, too, this small bit of tropical land was
 439 profitable during the latter days of Bourbon royalty. Neither Mar-
 tinique nor Guadeloupe could compare with it in value. In 1789
 505 nearly two thirds of the foreign commercial interests of France
 648 centred in Saint-Domingue; its combined exports and imports were
 valued at more than \$140,000,000; its sugar, coffee, indigo, and
 cotton supplied the home market and employed in prosperous years
 more than 700 ocean-going vessels, with as many as 80,000 seamen.²

175 Where wealth exists, social distinctions generally develop. In
 565 Saint-Domingue the evolving class system produced such discord
 669 that sparks from the French Revolution eventually set off an explo-
 sion in the colony. Casual surveys of Haitian history generally record
 that in 1791 the slaves revolted, and that out of this insurrection grew
 the war of independence. This is true; but it was not the resentment
 of slaves against their masters which caused the final explosion; the
 175 slaves were tinder used by others to keep the conflagration burning.
 565 Negro slaves, of course, did not figure in the "class" system; they
 [567] were below the classes of colonial society. The class system, properly

[101] 1. The word "creole" means only "colonial born"; there is no connotation of race mixture in the term.

2. Pamphile de Lacroix, *Mémoires*, II, 277.